2. Villiers 7-5 (1938-39) 1948 MK2 Maritime Arabs MK2
Kuwait MI1

When a deep-sea dhow is built, at least some of the money is put up by the *nakhoda* himself and his family. It is the first essential of the *nakhoda* that he should be from a family of standing in the community, which will pay its debts. Just why such families cannot finance a dhow by themselves I was unable to discover, but the Arab, apparently, has no objection to carrying on business under a cumbersome structure of debt. The merchant, backed by the Sheikh or the ruling family, backs the *nakhoda's* family, who support in turn a trusted and experienced member to take command of the dhow.

It is customary for the boys in such families to go to sea while very young, but they never work as sailors. They are always privileged: no sailor can become a deep-sea *nakhoda*, since obviously if his family is of standing, he would never serve before the mast. The children sail with him sometimes from the age of six or seven, though not regularly. They will make one or two long voyages, looking on and learning but not actually doing anything; then they will remain at home a year or two before going out again. They take command very young. Schooling, at least in 1939, was normally restricted to the local Koranic schools, and rarely occupied more than three months in the year. Only merchants' sons went to the colleges of Iraq, Egypt, and Syria.

Gradually the head of a *nakhoda's* family may attain the status of a lesser merchant himself, though his merchandise is generally limited to the wherewithal to build ships, which comes up in his own dhows from the Malabar coast. But a *nakhoda* himself almost never becomes a merchant, and a merchant's son never becomes a *nakhoda*. Nevertheless, the profession of conducting deep-sea dhows about the waters of the Indian Ocean is a highly respected one, and the shipmasters of Kuwait are, on the whole, a very competent and knowledgeable class, though few of them can practice much astronomical navigation. Even their long voyages down to Zanzibar or to Calicut are coasting, really down with one monsoon, and back with the other, almost always in sight of land. Their real ability consists in their local knowledge, both of ports and trade.

In Kuwait, in 1939 — as now — there were upwards of 10,000 qualified deep-sea sailors. An astonishingly high proportion is of

2: Villiers T-5 (1938-39) 1948 MK2 Maritime Arabs MK2
Kuwait MT1

K MA 505 365

Negro origin, the descendants of slaves, though not now slaves themselves. Many others are of Iranian origin. Almost none are Bedouin, for the Arab Bedouin is not a seafaring man. In Kuwait, the callings open to the low-class Iranian are restricted to portering, pearling (either as diver or as tender), and sailing. Both Iranians and Negroes work splendidly, are loyal, competent, and well disciplined.

MA 565 426 465 228 428

As the *nakhoda* class is tied to the merchant by a structure of debt, so also are the sailors tied to the *nakhoda* class in the same way. All deep-sea sailing is paid for on a shares system, and there are no wages. Often the *nakhoda* of the deep-sea dhow has an interest in a pearling vessel (though not now to anything like the same extent as in former years), and the sailor may be bound to him through pearling debts, either his own or inherited. The more iniquitous practices in the pearling business structure have long been on the way out, largely because of the excellent example set at Bahrein, but the debt tradition stands and is almost impossible to eradicate.

MA 505 511 342 291 515 501 565

The sailors go to sea because they know no other life, and they make a wretched living by incredibly difficult methods. They have no possessions other than the clothes they stand in, and one or two spare gowns, a good headcloth, and a few sarongs. Their toothbrush is the twig of a tree; their ablutions are made five times daily at a mosque well, or in the sea; they know no shelter and rarely have a bed. The younger seamen, I have noticed, often have no home other than the *suq*, or native bazaar, where they coil down in their rough cloaks for a night's sleep on a bench in a cheap coffee shop, or in the sand. At sea, they stretch out on the deck, beneath the stars, for there is no such thing as accommodation for the seamen or anyone else in most dhows. The officers and the more important merchants live on a bench round the wheel, in the stern of the ship; the seamen lie down anywhere.

MA 565 554 165

What keeps the seaman a disciplined and more or less contented worker is his hope of reward, principally from smuggling or his own ventures, and his ambition to get hold of a tiny shop in the *suq* of his home town. This is an ambition he rarely achieves. His more usual fate is to die young, especially if he be

also a pearl diver.

2: Villiers T-5 (1938-39) 1948 MK2 Maritime Arabs MK2
Kuwait MI 1

000 K MA 228

also a pearl diver. Pearling from Kuwait and Bahrein is carried on during the season of the hard southwest monsoon in the Indian Ocean, when the big dhows are laid up and there is no ocean sailing. It is therefore possible for the same men to carry on both callings, though in these days the seaman is becoming a little too enlightened to go off cheerfully to the purgatory of pearling.

MA 565 581 595

The seaman is also helped by his religion, by his interest in the seafaring life (which has a great appeal of its own) and the fine camaraderie about it, and in many cases by the delights of night life in such ports as Zanzibar and Bombay. If he has no harem of his own back in Kuwait, he is certainly no celibate at Zanzibar. He generally seems to manage a small home in Kuwait after a few voyages, depending upon his own business acumen and the general success of the dhow he serves in. Many *nakhodas* appear to maintain several.

MA 505 565

In addition to the merchants, *nakhodas*, and seamen, there is another class of importance in the dhow trade. These are the mates, the experienced officers who, never able to become *nakhodas* themselves because of an unacceptable financial status, very often have more to do with the actual sailing of the dhow than the *nakhoda*. Each big dhow carries at least one such experienced man. Sometimes he is of Iranian origin, and has been sailing since he could walk. Sometimes he is a Negro, member of a trusted ex-slave family, who lives with the *nakhoda* at home or has been brought up in his courtyard.

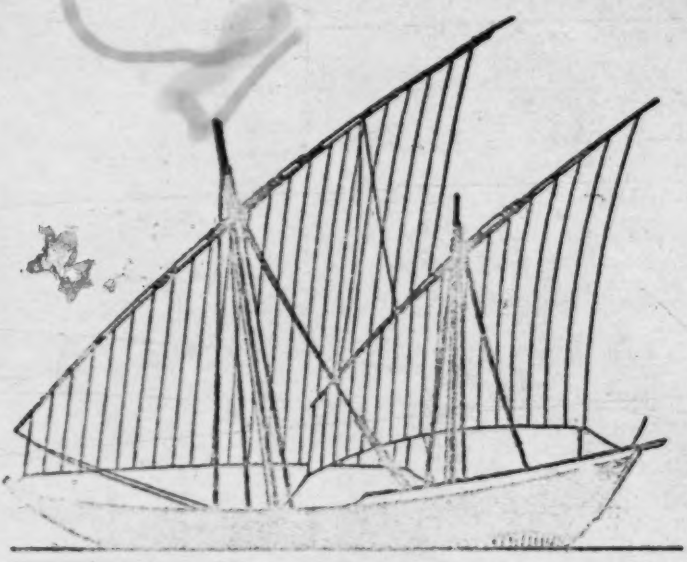
MA 505 565 439

He is always an able mariner, but he is not often trusted to trade. It is not at all uncommon for a *nakhoda*, on the usual East African voyage — which always begins with a long haul and long-winded peddling of dates round the coasts of Southern Arabia, and to Berbera and perhaps Djibouti — to leave the ship for considerable portions of the passage at sea, while he looks after her business interests ashore. For example, in one Kuwait dhow in which I had the good fortune to sail for some eight months, the *nakhoda* cheerfully left the ship at Aden and went on to Mukalla by steamer, to steal a march on the other shipmasters and scoop the cream — he hoped — from the passenger market. Again, he left the ship at Zanzibar, and his mate took her down to the delta of the Rufiji, hauled her out on the beach at Kwale Island south

2: Villiers T-5 (1938-39) 1948 MK2 Maritime Arab MK2

of Dar es Salaam, loaded her with mangrove poles, and brought her back to Zanzibar again, where the *nakhoda* had ostensibly been trying to assemble passengers and extra cargo for the return to Arabia but in fact had been enjoying a new harem.

Mates are paid by shares, and are, in my opinion, an oppressed class. They carry their own ventures, engage in smuggling on a



Baggala

small scale — haberdashery, currency, and so forth — and generally keep the ship's books. They may become *nakhodas* of small *booms*, running to the Basra river; but it is unusual for a man from the more dignified deep-sea trades to descend to this. There is no social status about the *nakhoda* of a coastwise water dhow.

Ships are built by shipwrights who employ no naval architects. Both builders and riggers' lofts are unknown. The ships are put together entirely by eye and take the traditional form either of the double-ended *boom*, or the carved and embellished *baggala*, which obviously has a considerable ancestry from the Portuguese

2: Villiers T-5 (1938-39) 1948 MK2 Maritime Arabs MK2
Kuwait MI1

MA 396 501

galleon. *Baggalas*, being both costly to build and unwieldy in a seaway, are now unfashionable. A *boom* is both cheaper and much easier to build, and carries just as much. Her sharp stern makes her safer in a seaway, though it is no part of her builder's plan that her *nakhodas* will try her qualities in a storm. Their sailing, he hopes, will be confined to sunny seas and more or less favorable winds; therefore the clumsy lateen rig will do.

K MA 501 505

The lateen is awkward but cheap; it demands a big crew, but these are cheap, too, for they are the sailmakers and riggers as well as mariners, and their only cost is an agreed share in the ship's earnings. The lateen is a grand pulling sail, and the dhows sail handsomely in their own conditions. There is nothing clumsy about them, though their fish-oiled hulls smell abominably and their underwater bodies are preserved by a mixture of tallow and lime, rubbed on by hand and renewed quarterly. The sailors do this work, as well as handle all the cargoes, keep the passengers in order and extol the merits of their ship so that more passengers might sail with her, tow the ship with her own longboat and propel the smaller dhows by sweeps, in calms, and fight for her if need be. The Kuwait dhows today are never armed, though the Suri may be.

K MA [566]

III

K MA 505 501 439

A brief description of my personal experiences will serve to illustrate a typical East African voyage.[1] I sailed in a Kuwait dhow of the *boom* type, a vessel of 2,000 date-packages capacity — perhaps 150 tons — which had a crew of twenty-eight. She carried something between 120 and 180 passengers, although her hold was full of salt and rice, and her decks were already crowded with a large longboat, a small gig, and a dhow under construction for sale at Lamu.

K MA 439 505

I joined the vessel at Ma'alla, the native port of Aden. She had already been several months at sea, peddling a full cargo of dates from Fao (by the mouth of the Basra river) around the coast of the Hadhramaut, and to Berbera. When I joined her, she had been hauled out on the beach at Ma'alla and her bottom

K MA 113

[1] The voyage here summarized is described in detail in the author's *Sons of Sinbad* (New York, 1940).

5: Harrison D-4 (1912-1924) 1924 MI Middle East
Maritime Arabs MK2

turned from four months or more of exhausting work, during which time they have been half starved and have had no opportunity of finding enjoyment and pleasure, legitimate or otherwise. The result is precisely what might be expected. Persian rugs in the bazaar go up to twice their proper price as does anything else that the divers may fancy. Meat reaches the highest price of the year, and the same is true of fish, which food the divers enjoy above everything else. Gambling is all but universal. Immorality flourishes. This state of affairs lasts a month, perhaps two months. Then things gradually settle down into the regular winter stagnation until the next diving season.

The same thing happens on a smaller scale when the season opens. Advances are made to the men. Feasts are held. There is much good fellowship and coöperation as the preparations for the season are completed. The chanting of singers can be heard late into the night. The money advanced by the captains makes a great show as it is spent. Strangers come in from far and near to go out and dive with the local men, and the city wears such a gala appearance as it scarcely puts on again till the next season.

It is thus that an astonishingly attractive tinsel surface is maintained over an industry and a manner of life that even for Arabia are bitterly sordid and exhausting. The pearl diver's life is one of poverty, hard and cruel. In a bad season it is with difficulty that he gets enough to eat. His lot is distinctly worse than that of the date cultivator. Diving wrecks the health as no other Arabian occupation wrecks it. The high pressure of the water at great depths frequently bursts the ear drums, and it is a safe conjecture that no community of equal size anywhere can show

[of divers returning with their wages -- Analyst]

5: Harrison D-4 (1912-1924) 1924 M1 Middle East
Maritime Arabs NK2

505 trade, the profits of a sailing boat have diminished and the percentage of the population that supports itself this way is very small.

505 However, since all the food and clothing of the com-
439 munity must be imported, and in places even the water and building material, trade in the Persian Gulf reaches large proportions. Rice is imported by hundreds of thousands of sacks each year. A special steamer of the Standard Oil Company brings kerosene oil from New York. There is a large importation of the stronger and cheaper grades of foreign cloth. The rice and kerosene and the various imports from India, such as dishes and lanterns and all sorts of gaudy trinkets, are brought in steamers. The British India Steamship Company has a line of coasting steamers which call every week at the larger Gulf ports. Some food materials are brought from Mesopotamia and from Persia, and these smaller importations from near-by ports are often brought in sail boats. All of these imports are paid for indirectly with pearls. The last season before the Great War the value of the pearls marketed in Bahrein was estimated at three *crores* or about $9,000,000.

441 There are no merchants in the whole peninsula that are
565 so rich as the pearl merchants of the East Coast. There
566 are a few of these merchants that could rank as millionaires if their fortunes were measured in American money. These men are more or less educated and have traveled extensively. Many of them take newspapers and read modern books. Their establishments are places of great luxury and comfort, with many of the outward signs of modern civilization. Their houses and offices may be lit by electric lights, and their taste extends even
000 to motor launches and automobiles. The larger ports of

5: Harrison D-4 (1912-1924) 1924 M1 Middle East
Maritime Arabs N/K2

567 or threat seemed to stir him. They are exceedingly
158 superstitious, too, and are frequently visited by a familiar spirit, who takes complete possession of the individual. The Arabs on the Pirate Coast are not especially superstitious. They are Sunni Mohammedans, and that sort of faith does not readily lend itself to superstition. However, when one of these negro slaves starts up as if suddenly crazed, and runs around shouting and gesticulating and talking earnestly in a changed voice as if a new personality had possessed him, even the hard Arab masters are a good deal awed and hesitate to inflict the punishment they had planned. These visitations may come at the most opportune times, and it takes more hardihood than the Arab usually possesses to disregard such a warning. I have had such a slave jump suddenly from the operating table when all preparations were complete and I had the knife in my hand to begin an operation for the removal of a tumor from his neck. The operation was to be done under local anesthesia, so the patient was fully conscious. We were thankful that he did not wait till ten minutes later when the operation would have been well under way. These slaves are not shamming in any ordinary sense. They thoroughly believe in the genuineness of such manifestations. They do not thus escape every whipping, but these visitations undoubtedly do protect them from a certain number of terrible punishments at the hands of their Arab masters.

● 565 In these diving communities the actual control even
64 of the civil powers rests in the hands of the diving captains and the pearl merchants. The town of Ras el Kheima has a number of divers who regularly dive in boats the captains of which live in Dibai and Sharja. During one winter war of a small sort broke out between

5: Harrison D-4 (1912-1924) 1924 Mil Middle East
Maritime Arabs MK2.

the Sheikh of Ras el Kheima and some of the inland tribes of that district, and this fighting was pushed quite vigorously, the city being more or less in a state of siege. It was not difficult to hold the port itself against attack, but as the fighting continued, the diving season came on. The merchants of Sharja and Dibai then sent representatives to settle the matter, for their divers were being held in the city for its defense and had not reported for diving. The Sheikh was far from willing to make peace, but eventually the pressure of these men of money was too much for him, and he was compelled to settle with the tribesmen so his subjects could go out and work for the men whose debtors they were.

Conditions in a diving community are not pleasant to see. They seem the more pitiful because they are so unnecessary. Why should not any dozen men who are out of debt, or a dozen beginners, club together, borrow the capital for the season's supplies, or better, save their money for a season or two and then have the capital sufficient for the enterprise? One-half of an ordinary year's profits would probably meet all expenses and another half season's profits would buy the boat that carries the men. The pearl banks are free, the markets are free. It would be easy to purchase supplies at the same price that every one else pays. The proceeds of such a group would be subject to the same element of chance as every pearl diver's but in any case should be at least twice those they receive at present, inasmuch as the captain's and the pearl merchant's extortions would be avoided. Any dozen divers might do it. The skill required is most moderate and the necessary capital within easy reach.

As a matter of fact the experiment is occasionally tried, but I never knew it to last through more than one